*Jewish Sports Legends: The International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame*

Fifth Edition

Joseph Siegman

Reviewed by Alan Zaremba, Communications Studies, Northeastern University

*Jewish Sports Legends* is the official publication of The International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame*.*  The book is a composite of information that can be found at the *Hall of Fame* website*.* This includes biographical information about those persons who have been enshrined in the Hall: Jewish athletes, members of the sports media, a group called Contributors, those who have been honored for Lifetime Achievement, and individuals who have won the Chairman’s Award for Excellence. In addition, the book--like the site-- includes a history of the Maccabiah games, a listing of Jewish Olympic medalists, as well as a tribute to the slain 1972 Israeli athletes. With some minor editing, the exact same biographical profiles that one finds on the site appear in the book. The advantage of the book is that all the information is relatively easy to access, particularly for those who enjoy holding a book in one’s hand or might just want to thumb through the volume as opposed to click into, and then exit out of, the various links. Readers of the book may serendipitously discover meaningful or at least interesting stories that could be missed by searching for a particular inductee on the website.

*Jewish Sports Legends* is likely intended not to be read cover to cover, but rather to be an encyclopedic resource. However, to write this review I did read it cover to cover as one would a book, and I am glad I did. This was a valuable read in many respects. If one is interested in sports history and ethnic groups’ contributions to sports, particularly Jewish contributions, there is a wealth of information here.

The book has a number of positive features. It presents information about athletes from many eras and consequently will acquaint readers with athletes unfamiliar to a particular generation. This is, as the IJSHOF name suggests, an organization and publication with a global perspective. Those who know a good deal about their country will learn about athletes from many. There is a historical perspective to the book as well, with several of the inductees across sports being affected by, and in some cases destroyed by, the Nazis. There are also stories that reflect social inequities and how sport can serve to facilitate change. A number of entries are about women who could not play their sport and had to fight to be recognized or had to pose as men in order to compete.

In addition, some of the profiles are just fascinating. A 19th century baseball player named Lip Pike was so speedy that he beat a racehorse in a sprint. The woman basketball player (and later coach), Orna Ostfelt once scored 108 points in a basketball game. The 1935-1936 LIU Blackbirds’ basketball team, that was supposed to represent the United States in the Olympics voted as a team to boycott the 1936 games because of Hitler. A prize fighter named Benny Leonard was said by a scribe to have “done more to conquer anti-Semitism than a thousand textbooks.” Another prize fighter-- appropriately named “Battling” Levinsky--fought thirty-seven times in 1919 and nine times in a single month. Rena Glickman posed as a man in order to compete in a judo competition and won the 1959 YMCA judo championship. (She subsequently had to return her medal when it was discovered she was a woman). Benny Lom, an American football player, once tackled an opponent causing the player to fumble but then had to chase down his own teammate who had picked up the ball but galloped toward the wrong endzone. Lom managed to temporarily prevent disaster when he tackled his teammate near the endzone.

The book is filled with stories like this which sport enthusiasts and perhaps just interested readers will enjoy. I was regularly writing notes in the margins like, “I did not know that” or “find out more” about an event or person.

I do have some constructive suggestions.

It would have been good in the introduction of the book to explain the Hall of Fame selection process. What makes a legend a legend? In a prefatory section there is a reference to a group of electors and a slate of nominees, but what specific criteria are applied; how are nominations solicited? Moe Berg, a back-up catcher, is a “legend” but Julian Edelman who was a super bowl MVP and made one of the greatest catches in super bowl history is not. Berg was also a spy, so were his beyond the field activities what made him a legend. Are athletes eligible if they are still playing? It would have been good to read the criteria for legendary status. It would also have been good to indicate if the identified author, Joseph Siegman, was the editor of this compendium or if he had indeed written each of the blurbs. Academics, at least, would like to look at sources that were used for providing information about those enshrined. In an Acknowledgements section there are references to sources that were used to gather information for the profiles, and a long list of individuals who assisted with research. A comprehensive list of sources would be valuable, as would be an indication of authors who wrote particular profiles, if not all entries were authored by Mr. Siegman.

There is an important footnote that begins on page 315. It refers to the very real difficulty of determining who is or who is not Jewish. The note explains the challenges well, and the criteria employed, but it should appear in the beginning of the book. Also, the note is placed after the section that lists athletes who won Olympic medals. It is not clear if the note and criteria apply only to the athletes identified as Jews who won medals, or if that criteria was applied when determining who was eligible to be inducted into the Hall of Fame.

Finally, there are a few errors that I could identify because I happened to know some things about the athlete or sport involved. These errors made me wonder if other entries contained similar inaccuracies. Dolph Schayes is said to have coached the 1965-66 Philadelphia 76ers to the NBA championship. The Celtics won the championship in the 1965-66 season. The 76ers won in 1966-67. An entry refers to the college football platoon protocol that existed into the mid 50s. While some changes were made beginning in the fifties, the platoon system actually did not end until after the 1964 season. Abe Saperstein is said to have founded the ill-fated American Basketball League which lasted only one and half years. The entry indicates that the ABL would eventually merge into the NBA. The ABL did not merge with the NBA. The ABA merged with the NBA. Some of the innovations of the ABL found its way eventually into the NBA, but teams from the ABL did not become part of the NBA. (Interesting while most entries in the book are, with maybe a few edited words, verbatim from the entries on the IJSHOF site, the information about the ABL merging with the NBA is not on the website entry). As an author myself I know how errors, despite painstaking proofreading, can nevertheless surface. Given the enormity of this project I don’t see these errors as a major drawback.

In sum, I wondered what I had gotten myself into when I volunteered to review the book. When it arrived and I thumbed through it and saw all the entries, I assumed that the job of reading and reviewing the book would be a slog and a chore. On the contrary, I found the book to be an interesting read. It was engaging, included valuable information from both historical and social issues perspectives, provided stories about dozens of fascinating individuals, and encouraged at least this curious reader to want to learn more.